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SHASTA COUNTY AUTO TRANSPORT BROKER SENTENCED TO PRISON

SACRAMENTO--United States Attorney McGregor W. Scott announced today that BILLY D. SOUTHERLAND, 63, of Anderson, California, was sentenced today by United States District Judge Garland E. Burrell, Jr., to serve 67 months in federal prison and to pay restitution to 189 victims. The defendant was found guilty by a jury on March 22, 2005, on three felony counts of mail and wire fraud.

This case is the result of an extensive joint investigation by the Office of Inspector General of the United States Department of Transportation and the Shasta County District Attorney's Office, Bureau of Investigation.

According to Assistant United States Attorney Matthew Stegman, who prosecuted the case, the evidence at trial showed that from at least March of 2002, through January of 2004, SOUTHERLAND advertised his auto moving business Southerland Auto on the Internet, using website names such as MovingMyCar.com and many others, to people who needed to have their cars transported from one city to another. Customers would send money to the defendant believing that their vehicles would be picked up for a specified price within 7 to 10 days. SOUTHERLAND would fail to perform within the stated days, and would engage in "bait and switch" tactics, by offering below market prices to lure potential customers to his business. After customers complained that their cars had not been moved, SOUTHERLAND and his employees would tell the customers to pay more money to "upgrade" for express pickup priority service.

When customers attempted to cancel with SOUTHERLAND, he would refuse to refund some or all of the customer's money, claiming it to be a "non-refundable deposit."

SOUTHERLAND also engaged in tactics designed to prevent dissatisfied customers from complaining to the Better Business Bureau by threatening to charge an additional \$200 above the "non-refundable \$200 deposit" to customers who filed complaints with the Better Business Bureau.

The jury found the defendant guilty of engaging in a scheme to defraud from December 28, 2001, to January 29, 2004. Judge Burrell found that the amount of money the defendant obtained from the fraud from December of 2002 through November of 2003, was \$604,585.25. This figure was based on the defendants records which were evidence at trial. To date 183 victims have been identified for whom the court has ordered \$95,912.46 in restitution.

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